

## The Doctrine of Atonement

Having considered the meaning of atonement in the Old Testament and seen how the various occurrences foreshadow the work of Jesus, we turn our attention to the doctrine of atonement. The New Testament does not present a definitive doctrine of atonement. Such a doctrine is a collection of interpretations based on scripture and collected together in a coherent form. This section presents an outline of the interpretation and belief of evangelical christians generally. Other interpretations of the doctrine are, or have been, held by other movements and traditions. We will consider the fulfilment of the Old Testament “shadows” accomplished in the work and ministry of Jesus Christ. With this in mind, it would be helpful to read Hebrews 9-10:18.

The word “atonement” is found once in the New Testament, in Romans 5:11. However this is a poor translation and is not used elsewhere when the same greek word (*katallasso*) appears.

“Translated “atonement in the A.V.of Rom. 5:11, signifies not “atonement” but “reconciliation” as in the R.V.”

Expository Dictionary of Bible Words

W.E.Vine

We do, of course, use atonement to mean restitution in our personal, social lives. The idea is similar to that within this doctrine, but it is important, indeed vital, to realise that there is no way in which sinful people can make restitution to God. There are a number of theories about atonement, but evangelical christians have traditionally accepted and taught the “penal substitution” theory. In broad terms this holds firstly that when Jesus died, he suffered the penalty for sins – that is he died and took upon himself the wrath of God. Secondly he was suffering in our place – he was our substitute.

***“He himself bore our sins in his own body on the cross”***

***2Pet2:24a***

One day they led Him up Calvary's mountain,  
One day they nailed Him to die on the tree;  
Suffering anguish, despised and rejected:  
Bearing our sins – my redeemer is He!

In Christ alone - who took on flesh,  
Fulness of God in helpless babe.  
This gift of love and righteousness,  
Scorned by the ones He came to save  
Till on that cross as Jesus died,  
The wrath of God was satisfied  
For every sin on Him was laid  
Here in the death of Christ I live.

The foremost idea connected with atonement in the New Testament is reconciliation. This is necessary because people were estranged from God, indeed the Bible puts it even more forcefully,

***“Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!”***

***Ro5:9-11***

It is important to realise here that the enmity is on our side, not God's. The reconciliation is accomplished by God through the sacrifice of Jesus which atones for our sin. We receive the result of this atonement, that is reconciliation. The change of relationship from enemies to friends, brothers and joint heirs is due to a change of attitude on our part, not God's. God always shows favour and love toward us. It is our heart which needs to be changed. Reconciliation is a gift from God.

***“So from now on we regard no-one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”***  
**2Cor5:16-21**

There is so much in this brief passage! We were worldly, we are no longer. We are new creatures. God has accomplished this in Jesus. God has made us ambassadors of Christ. Still it is God who makes the final appeal. The sinless Christ became sin for us. We, by his blood through his atoning death, are made righteous before God. We have so much to be thankful for, so much to lift our hearts, hands and voices before God and declare Him to be loving and giving,

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty  
The King of creation!  
O my soul, praise Him  
For he is thy health and salvation.  
All ye who hear, brothers and sisters, draw near  
Praise Him with glad adoration.  
(Joachim Neander tr. Catherine Winkworth)

There is one thing which stands out again and again when the Bible speaks about reconciliation. Never is it said that God is reconciled to us, but always that we are reconciled to Him. The Greek text is important here, for there are two similar words (*diallasso* and *katallasso*) which could be used, but only one, *katallasso*, ever is. (You will find *diallasso* in Matt5:24 where the crowd are advised to be reconciled or come to an agreement with the adversary before going to court.) *Diallasso* means to reconcile by mutual concession. *Katallasso* does not imply mutual concession.

“When the writers of the N.T. speak upon the subject of the wrath of God, 'the hostility is represented not as on the part of God, but of man. And this is the reason why the Apostle never uses *diallasso* in this connection, but always *katallasso* because the former word denotes mutual concession after mutual hostility, an idea absent from *katallasso*.'”  
W.E.Vine “Expository Dictionary of Bible Words” p261 quoting  
Lightfoot “Notes on the Epistles of Paul” p288

Indeed, how could it be that God held enmity in His heart, since God is love (1Jn4:8) and love and enmity cannot co-exist within one person. When God determined to reconcile us to him, He did so out of love and justice

***“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him, shall not perish but have eternal life.”***  
**Jn3:16**

***“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.”  
Jn15:13***

How deep the Father's love for us,  
How vast beyond all measure.  
That He should give His only Son  
To make a wretch His treasure  
(Stuart Townend)

Beneath the cross of Jesus  
I fain would take my stand.  
The shadow of a mighty rock  
Within a weary land

Oh, safe and happy shelter!  
Oh, refuge tried and sweet!  
Oh trysting place where heaven's love  
And heaven's justice meet.  
(Elizabeth Clephane)

This hymn links the two drivers behind God's motivation for the atoning work of Jesus, love and justice. We have already considered the love, not let us look to the justice aspect. In discussing faith, law and righteousness Paul writes this,

***“... no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known .... This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. ... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came through Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement (propitiation), through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, ... he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”  
Rom3:20-26***

So the law with its sacrifices did not reconcile people to God. As we saw in the previous session, the blood of the sacrifices provided a cover between God and sin. Righteousness and justification comes through the blood of Jesus. So the sacrifice Jesus made of himself on the cross satisfies the justice of God. He died in our place in order to pay our penalty for sin and so to enable God's complete favour to rest on us and stay with us. Isaiah53 is applied to Jesus six times in the New Testament, including the passage being read by the Ethiopian eunuch which Philip uses to explain to him the good news about Jesus and in 1 Peter 2:22-25.

***“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”  
Is53:4-6***

This is the idea behind the word “propitiation” - that Jesus died to enable us to receive God's full favour. There is no requirement placed on people except to exercise the faith God gives them to

accept Jesus' sacrifice.

***“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God....”  
Eph2:8***

Two other points are worth exploration. Firstly, was the process of atonement necessary and secondly, was it only by the death of Jesus that this atonement could be brought about? On the first question, the answer, strictly speaking is, no atonement is not absolutely necessary. God could have just left mankind in sin awaiting His judgement. After all, we read in 2 Peter (and similarly in Jude6) that God

***“did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell, putting them in chains of darkness to be held for judgement”  
2Pet2:4***

God could have responded in the same way towards mankind. However, prompted by his love, he chose to find a way to reconcile us to him. Once that decision was taken, the second question remained. So, did Jesus have to die? Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane in overwhelming sorrow, amongst many other things for his disciples.

***“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will. ... My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”  
Mark14:36,42***

Having been strengthened by the ministry of an angel, he underwent anguish of soul such that his sweat ran like drops of blood and then submitted to his Father's will. He willingly accepted the suffering he was about to endure for our sake. This strongly suggests that there was no other way.

On the road to Emmaus, Jesus admonished the two disciples and then taught them about the necessity of his death.

***“He said to them, 'How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”  
Luke24:25-17***

He made a similar statement to the disciples in the upper room. (Lke14:44) and expanded further on it (Lke24:45-49). Jesus understood fully the need for his suffering and death, and he knew that the Old Testament bore witness to the need and its fulfilment in the life and death of the Messiah. It is important at this point, to remind ourselves that God the Father did not act in isolation over this. These decisions involved all three persons of the Trinity. So it is completely incorrect to assert, as some do, that the idea of penal substitution is a kind of monstrous form of child abuse perpetrated by God the Father on God the Son.

Paul, as we have seen, was clear on the necessity of Jesus' death (Rom3:26) and the book of Hebrews argues that the blood of bulls and goats was sufficient for the copies of the heavenly things, but the heavenly things themselves require better sacrifices and goes on to show Jesus fulfilling the need.

***“...so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many: and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”***

***Heb9:28***

We are sinful, sin carries a penalty. We can be reconciled to God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) by the blood of Jesus. This is the only way in which the just God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) could reconcile us and he took this course out of the love he has for us.

There is a green hill far away without a city wall.  
Where the dear Lord was crucified, who died to save us all.

There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.  
He only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in.

Cecil Alexander